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ABSTRACT

For many learners in adult basic education (ABE) or General Educational Development (GED) classrooms, the difference between staying with the program and leaving prematurely is often related to the degree of the student's involvement with other members of the class. Grouping students to work together has both support- and learning-related benefits. There are basically five steps in the grouping process--initial contact, the first-night interview, testing, placement, and maintenance. In the initial contact phase, which often involves a phone conversation in which the student explains his or her reasons for wanting to enroll in a class, instructors should already be mentally considering into which group, if any, the student will fit. The first night interview provides valuable grouping information in the form of the student's goals for the course, previous schooling, prior work experience, and personal interests. Informal reading and mathematics tests may be given the first night. Although not absolutely necessary, it is best to keep students with the same ability level together if practical. After the evaluation of the student's ability, personality, and interests is complete and the student has had a chance to become familiar with what others in the class are doing, efforts are made to steer the individual student toward the group to which he or she appears most suited. It is very important that the dynamics of the individual groups within a class be watched closely and continually so that changes may be made when appropriate. (MN)

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Grouping Students for Effective Learning in the ABE Classroom

By Richard S. Davis and Ginger L. Davis

In the operation of our ABE/GED class, we have discovered that for many learners the difference between staying with the program and leaving prematurely is often related to the degree to which the student becomes involved with other members of the class. We recognize the benefits of grouping students to work together to be primarily twofold: support related and learning related.

Students receive support from other students who are working closely with them in similar areas, dealing with similar problems. Education for the adult basic student can be a long and lonely process, and the day-to-day encouragement that classmates can give each other is probably more important than that which students can derive from either the teacher or family. Another support-related benefit is in the actual assistance one student may receive from another; this may be with classwork or homework or in another way such as transportation to class. We have found that when ABE students work for a period of time in a tightly knit group, friendships form and students frequently get to know each other outside of class.

Learning-related benefits of students working together in small groups are also significant. We believe that education is primarily a social process. We have noticed greater attention in our students when they are working actively with other students. There is usually a tacit competition or beneficial tension aroused by students working together. Of course, the size of the group must be kept small so each student has a real place and voice in the group's activities. Because we feel the makeup of a group is important in the learning process, we take pains to ensure that students are placed in groups where they will be comfortable.

There are basically five steps in the grouping process.

Initial Contact

In this phase, the student usually contacts us by phone and explains his/her reasons for wanting to come to our class. If it appears we can help, we encourage the student to come to class as soon as possible. During the initial phone conversation, we are mentally considering which group, if any, the student might fit into. We do not turn students away from our program if they do not fit into an established group, but we consciously attempt to either channel students toward an existing group or consider forming a new group. One of our most important recruitment tools has been encouraging new students to bring friends or family members to study a topic of mutual interest. Most of our students know someone else who needs the same help they do, whether it is learning to read or help with GED preparation.

First Night Interview

The student is welcomed into the class and made to feel comfortable and at ease. We explain the types of services we offer and answer any questions the student may have. An application form is filled out (either by the student or a teacher), which provides us such information as the student's goals for the course, the amount of schooling he/she has had, prior work experience, and personal interests. The student is encouraged to look around the class and see what other students and groups are doing.

Testing

At some point, usually on the first night, we give informal reading and math tests which let us know about where the student stands in these areas. We do not believe that grouping students is necessarily tied to the ability or education of the students. We try to keep students on similar levels together; but, when this is not practical or possible, we alter our teaching methods so that students of different levels can participate in the same group profitably. This is not the time to talk about those methods; suffice to say, it can be done. Hopefully, in a later Techniques column, we can address that important issue.

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Placement

Once we have completed our evaluation of the student's ability, personality, and interests (and have given him/her a chance to become familiar with what other people in the class are doing), we usually see a group that we will try to steer the student toward. Again, we do not thrust students into groups but usually like to let this process occur naturally, if possible. Students new to the class are often fearful of meeting other students and expect class to be impersonal. We are careful not to rush the shy student into a group, nor to push an individual into a group which may not want him/her. We have found that the best way to introduce ABE students into established groups is to have group members meet the student first and talk about what they are doing. In this instance, it is okay if the students brag a little bit and feel superior. They have earned the right to check out potential new members before they are brought into the group. Almost always, when given recognition and authority, students respond generously and kindly. Of course, all of this activity is monitored by the teacher or administrator; and, if students don't respond as expected, the teacher should be prepared to try another tactic or group.

Maintenance

We believe that groupwork is vital, the single most important part of our class. Therefore, we are always watching the dynamics of our groups. If problems develop, we do not hesitate to switch students to other groups; and sometimes we switch teachers. We believe that the group, as a body, must be continually motivated and excited. Communication between members (including the teacher as a member) is vital and must not be forced or strained. In its best form, we see our groups as enthusiastic adults working together, each person contributing something vital, to solve important problems. **AAACE**

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